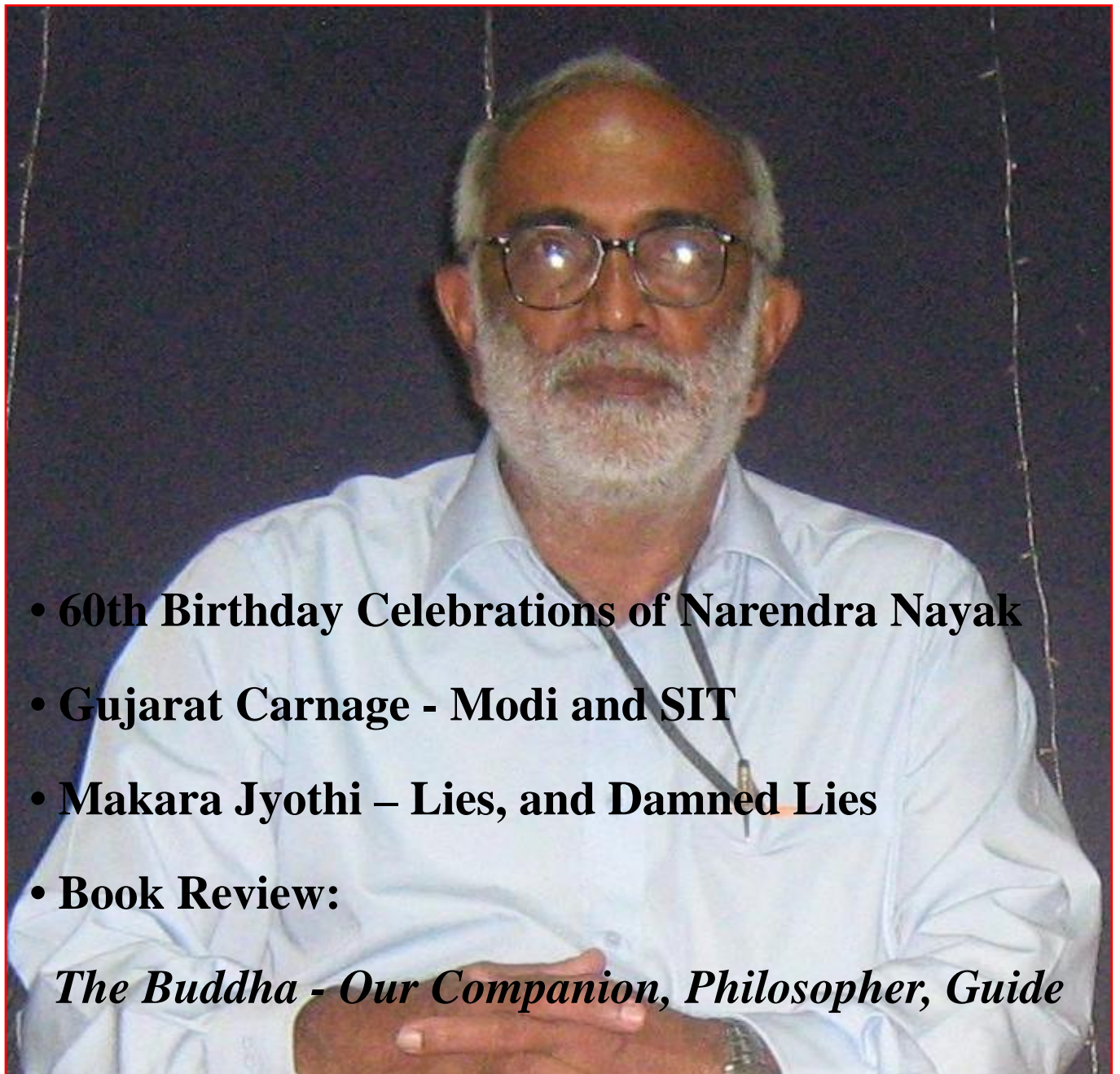


INDIAN SKEPTIC

No. 02/03

March 2011



- 60th Birthday Celebrations of Narendra Nayak
- Gujarat Carnage - Modi and SIT
- Makara Jyothi – Lies, and Damned Lies
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manoj trichambaram

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*It shall be the duty
of every citizen of
India -

to develop the
scientific temper,
humanism and the
spirit of inquiry and
reform*

*(Article 51A (h) Part IVA -
Fundamental Duties,
Constitution of India)*

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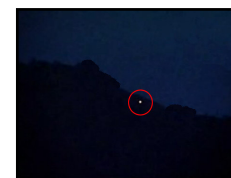
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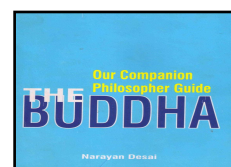


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Gujarat Carnage - Modi and SIT

Ram Puniyani

After the Special Investigation Team appointed by Supreme Court submitted its report in December 2010, a front page headline in a leading daily announced that SIT gives a clean chit to Modi. This was picked up by a large section of the media to hail Modi being the man for progress of Gujarat. The industrialist's chorus for Modi the potential Prime minister is on from last quit some time. This news of 'clean chit' to Modi gladdened the hearts of communal forces. The social activists could not believe what they read. Number of Citizens inquiry Committee reports has already worked overtime to bring forward the truth of Gujarat carnage. It has been called as a state sponsored carnage by social activists for no reason. The ground work of activists, interacting with the hapless victims already had given the precise picture of what took place in Gujarat. There are scores of Citizens committee reports, and also the report of Peoples tribunal, led by the leading legal luminary who had concluded that the carnage went on the way it did due to the pro active involvement of Modi Government which gave it the horrific character.

Despite all the reports a substantial section of the popular perception looked at Modi in a favorable light. The way truth is undermined when it pertains to the minorities and weaker sections of society was clear in the case of Gujarat carnage. Though 'social consciousnesses' had some doubts that the carnage was not handled well, the major focus was shifted to Godhra carnage and the alleged role of



Muslims was highlighted. This projected role of Muslims seemed to be giving justification to Hindus retaliating. Despite the Bannerjee Commissions report, saying that Godhra tragedy was not preplanned act by Muslims, in popular perceptions it could not make a dent as already the media and other propaganda machinery led by Modi had created the image of aggressive Muslims burning the train.

Now with SIT coming to investigate some aspects of the carnage there was a hope amongst victims and social activists that the truth of Gujarat, the truth of the state sponsored carnage will finally come out and the guilty will be punished and victims will get justice. With this hope in the background when the perceptions were manufactured that SIT has given a clean chit to Modi, it was a fake and bitter pill for the victims and social activists doing their best to fight for the cause of justice. With so called news of SIT giving clean chit many further lost the faith in the system, with the feeling that probably this is end of the road for justice in this country.

Fortunately that is not the case. The

Tehelka scoop (5th February 2011) clearly shows that the newspaper headline was a concoction. The scoop shows that the report has squarely put the blame of carnage on Modi. All the charges against him stand vindicated in the SIT investigation report. The report practically confirms all the findings of the people's tribunal and other Citizens committees who painstakingly investigated the Gujarat violence and called it a pogrom. The SIT report submitted to the Supreme Court tells that Modi had tried to alter the situation in the Gulbarg society by saying, by now most infamous, 'every action has equal and opposite reaction'. SIT report confirms that Gujarat Government had deputed ministers in the police control room, a move which gave the management of violence in the political hands making it more horrific and motivated act. It was a common knowledge that few honest police officers, who had stood by the call of their duty and prevented the aggravation of violence, were transferred to insignificant postings.

With this scoop now it stands confirmed

that the Gujarat Government had destroyed the records of wireless communication of the period of the violence. Modi did display a discriminatory attitude towards the victim minorities and he did not visit the riot affected areas or minority camps till quite late during the carnage. Government appointed RSS affiliated lawyers in the sensitive riot cases. Modi did not take any steps to stop the Bandh call given by VHP and supported by BJP on 28th February, this move of VHP gave a big start to the massacre and the attitude of state to the bandh gave a signal to the rioters for doing what they did. SIT confirms that the officials tried to mislead the election commission in the wake of forthcoming elections by projecting that there is peace and atmosphere is conducive for elections while the truth was that the violence was simmering in the society. Police has carried out extremely shoddy investigation of Naroda Patia and Gulbarg society cases.

There are diverse reactions to the report. The social activists are demanding that this is the sufficient ground for lodging FIR



against Modi. The BJP on the contrary is more worried about investigating as to how the leak took place. Interestingly while today this party is demanding probe into the scoop, BJP and no one else raised the question when the news 'SIT gives clean chit to Modi' was highlighted! Nobody in their best wisdom asked a question as to when the report is confidential how come this headline in the newspapers? In a classic display of double standards BJP never questioned the first 'leak', as that suited its political purpose. Now when the boot is in the other foot the legality of scoop etc is being raised.

Meanwhile what is happening to the victim community? They have been browbeaten in to second class citizenship, ghettoization is going up by leaps and bounds, and the process of justice to victims of violence is prominent by its absence, the efforts of human rights activists succeeding in few cases, notwithstanding.

That raises the larger issue of how the popular perceptions are modulated, how the mass consciousness is manufactured in the society. Right since the Godhra train burning a particular view of events put across by the murderers is dominating the media world. Any doubts about the major erosion of the story have been treated with contempt by large sections of media. In the case of headline 'SIT gives a clean chit to Modi', the same perception was

boosted that it is the minorities and social activists who are the cause of trouble. The social perceptions are very crucial in making the criminals of the of the ilk of Modi to rule with iron hand to and to keep getting re-elected despite having a huge stock of skeletons in the cupboard, despite there being blood on his hands.

In this battle for the minds of society the communal elements are having the major manipulating power at present. Goebbels is being outplayed in Gujarat. This whole episode should make us do the introspection as to how to ensure that 'truth shall prevail' in present circumstance. Also which are these forces, politics-media alliance which can manipulate the mass thinking at will by publishing that 'SIT has given clean chit to Modi'? If we cannot wake up to this stark fact of our society, such popular perceptions will be laying the ground for the mass murderers to keep ruling with the great appreciation from the communal forces and captains of industry and they can also manipulate the opinion of masses in their favor.

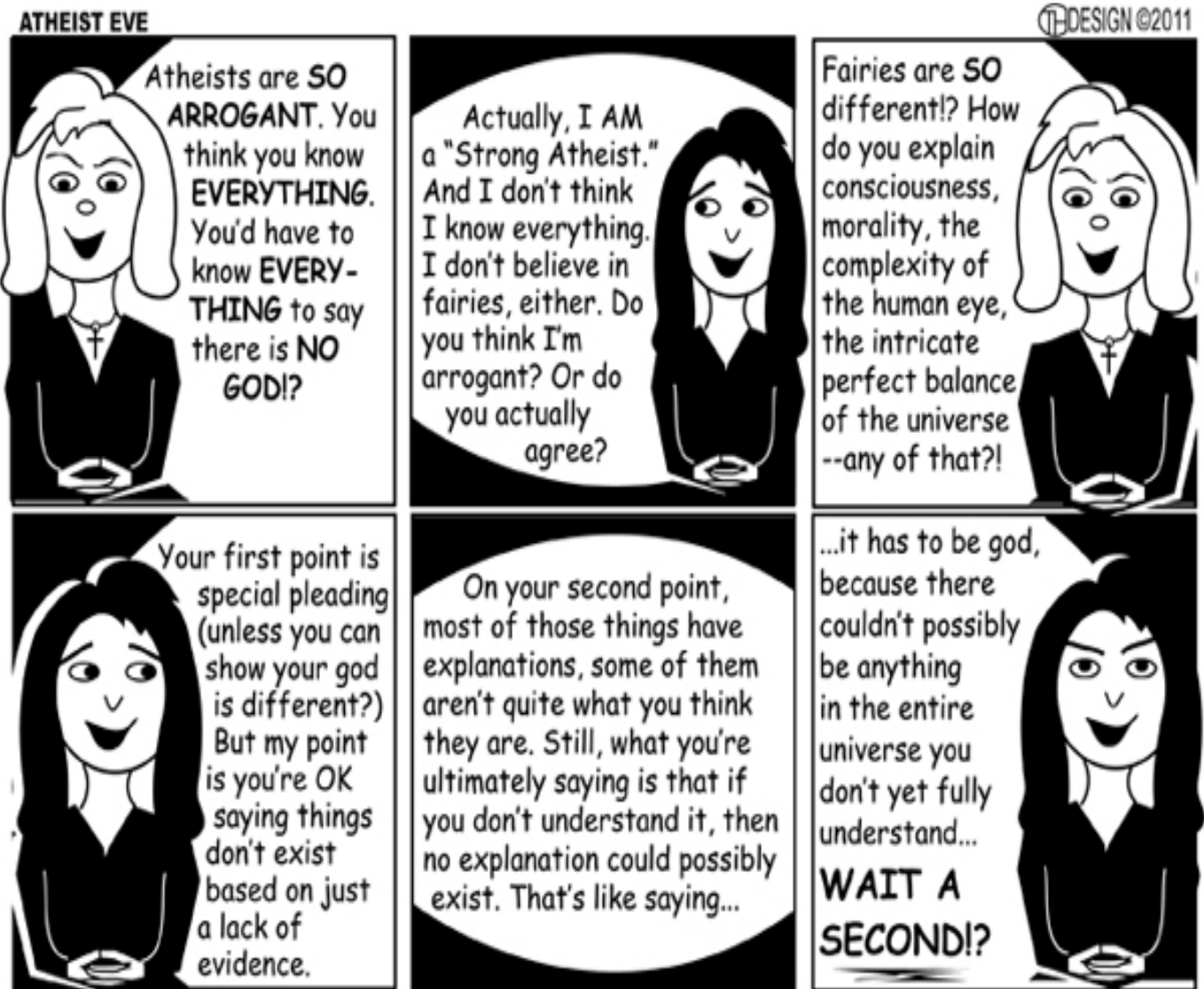
BS

Dr Ram Puniyani was Professor of Biomedical Engineering at IIT Mumbai. Currently he is associated with various secular initiatives. His website - www.pluralindia.com

From a theoretical point of view, believing in God always amounts to trying to explain something we do not understand (the universe, life, human consciousness) by something we understand even less (God). How can such an attitude satisfy us intellectually?

Andre Compte-Sponville
The Book of Atheist Spirituality (2007)

Argument from Arrogance



Tracie Harris is a graphic designer in Austin, Texas, US. According to the website, <http://www.atheist-community.org/>, "her long, slow recovery from a rabid fundamentalist upbringing led her to the creation of *Atheist Eve*".

Tracie Harris has been publishing *Atheist Eve* since 1 October 2004 and all her earlier works are archived at: <http://www.atheist-community.org/atheisteve/>. *Atheist Eve* is reproduced by *Indian Skeptic* with the author's permission.

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60th Birthday Celebrations of Narendra Nayak

Bangalore Skeptic

Prof Narendra Nayak turned 60 last month. Relatives and friends of Prof Nayak turned up in large numbers to attend the function held on 5th February 2011 marking the event. The Rotary Balbhavan auditorium in Mangalore, where the function was held, overflowed with – apart from relatives – people from various walks of life – Prof Nayak's comrades from the rationalist fraternity, his former students and colleagues from Kasturba Medical College (KMC) where he taught biochemistry for decades, trade union and consumer right activists, his childhood friends, journalist and staff of *Mangalore Today* to which Prof. Nayak

has been contributing a column since its launch 15 years back, the employees and customers of his business and even a top state level leader of a right wing political outfit, Sri Yogish Bhat, The Deputy speaker of the Karnataka Legislative assembly, who is a childhood friend of Prof Nayak and happens to be the member of the legislative assembly of Mangalore from the Bharatiya Janatha Party.

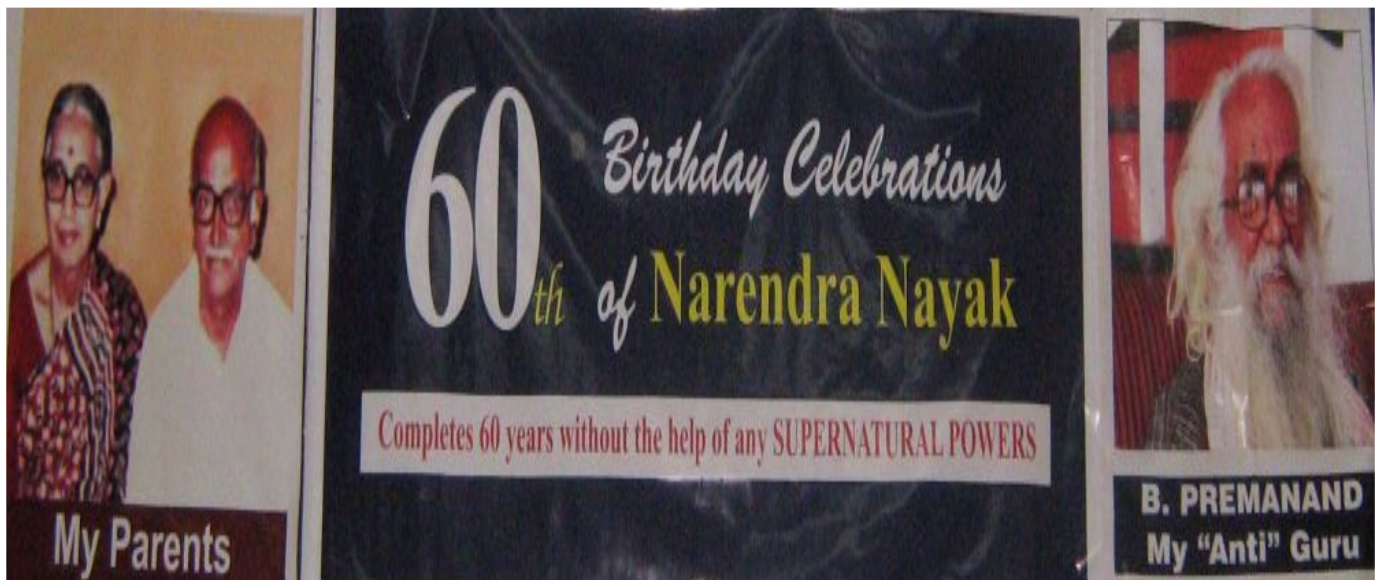
Ms Asha Nayak, Prof Nayak's wife, spoke about the time Prof Nayak spent at Kasturba Medical College, Mangalore, where he started his career as a lab-technician and resigned, more than three



decades later in 2006, as an Assistant Professor of Biochemistry. She then fondly reminisced about their marriage 30 years back. Though the marriage was a civil ceremony attended by their relatives and friends, theirs was not a love marriage, she said. She stressed this fact because people in India are generally under the wrong impression that only love marriages (conducted against the wishes of partners' relatives) are consecrated through the so-called "registered marriages". They decided to have a civil ceremony to prove a point that weddings need not be a lavish affair that religious weddings usually are.

Mr S.S. Kamath, one of the senior most members of Prof Nayak's paternal side family, attended the function though he

60 birthday as a normal civil ceremony. To make that point clear he put a banner in the hall proudly proclaiming "*Completes 60 years without the help of any super natural powers*". The banner also had the photographs of his late parents and that of Mr B Premanand, Prof Nayak's "anti-guru"! (I however differ with the opinion expressed by Mr Kamath. The celebration of *Sashtipurthy* involves a whole lot of religious rituals, none of which was part of Prof Nayak's 60th birthday celebrations. Moreover, it is at the age of 60 that one becomes a Senior Citizen in India, as per Government of India rules. Most of the government employees in India retire at the age of 60. Hence celebrating one's 60th birthday is essentially a secular one and therefore it is not exactly correct to equate celebrating one's 60th birthday with



was still recuperating from a surgery, and spoke about Prof Nayak's interests in various fields. He spoke at length about the days they spent together establishing the first consumer rights group in Mangalore and the campaigns they led under its banner. Interestingly, to me at least, he also spoke about the meaning of celebrating one's 60th birthday. He said that according to Indian Astrology, the life span of an individual is divided into 120 *dasas* and to mark the occasion of completing 60 *dasas*, *Shastipurthy* is celebrated. Prof Nayak does not give a hoot to astrology, but decided to go along with the wishes of his wife to celebrate his

Shastipoorthi. Yet I felt – on hearing this “*dasa*” business – that we could have celebrated Prof Nayak's birthday a year earlier or after – to “deconstruct” *Sashtipurthy*!)

Mr. U.Kalanathan, the founder-secretary of Federation of Indian Rationalist Associations (FIRA) and its current Chief-patron, spoke about the efforts made by Prof Nayak, with B. Premanand, in establishing the organization. Mr Kalanathan used the occasion, as is his wont, to spread the message of rationalism among the gathering and spoke about the fraud of Makarajyothi that is currently in

the news following the recent tragedy at Sabarimala.

One of his former students at KMC, Dr.Ullas Kamath who is now the Dean of Manipal Malakka Medical College at Manipal spoke about how good a teacher Prof Nayak was and the respect he had towards him. The fact that a student – now the head of a well known medical college at Manipal – chose to attend such a function and spoke about his association with his former teacher reveals how good indeed Prof Nayak was as a teacher.

A trade union stalwart from Dakshina Kannada remembered the day when he came all the way from Udupi to Mangalore to listen to Dr Abraham Kovoov speech at a meeting organized by Prof Nayak in 1978.

Prof Nayak's brother-in-law spoke of the wedding of his younger sister (Asha Nayak) 30 years back, devoid of any religious rituals and the gaudy display of jewellery and other paraphernalia that



normally accompany a 'regular' religious wedding.

Mr. V.U.George, editor and publisher of *Mangalore Today*, gifted a bound-volume of all the articles Prof Nayak wrote, uninterruptedly, for the magazine during the last 15 years of its existence.



Mr George said that though Prof Nayak could not so far make him a rationalist, as an editor he believed that it was necessary to take up the causes that Prof Nayak espoused in the articles. The editor and staff of *Mangalore Today* were the people - apart from relatives - who organized the function.

Towards the end of the function, a top political functionary of Bharatiya Janata Party Sri Yogish Bhat, the Deputy speaker of the Karnataka Legislative assembly arrived at the venue to extend his greetings. I find it exemplary that Prof Nayak retains his close personal relationship with individuals belonging to political outfits with which he not only differs but also actively campaign against on ideological grounds.

The guests from the rationalist fraternity included – apart from those from Mangalore and U Kalanathan – Somu and family from Goa, Sajit from Calicut, Subbarao and Dolly from Bangalore, and Swamy and Srinivas Natekar from Hassan.



The guests dispersed after having a sumptuous dinner consisting of South Canara style vegetarian dishes, and for non-vegetarians, pork curry and chicken kabab!

BS



Makara Jyothi – Lies, and Damned Lies

Manoj TV

‘Great!’ Robbie yelled. ‘Wonderful, brilliant. Suddenly a new theory, one that has never been mentioned before. One with absolutely no relation to the truth. Let the lying begin! We have a Web site, Koffee, and my sidekick Carlos here is going to keep a tally of the lies. Lies from the two of you, from the governor, the courts, may be even dear Judge Vivian Grale, if we can find her. You have lied for nine years in order to kill an innocent man, and now that we know the truth, now that your lies will be exposed, you insist on doing precisely what you have always done. Lie! You make me want to puke, Koffee.’

John Grisham, *The Confession*, 2010

The edifice of Sabarimala pilgrimage has been built, over the years, upon the massive fraud of what is called Makara Jyothi. While improved transportation (State Transport Corporations of South Indian states ply special buses during the season, for example) has definitely made accessibility of the temple easier bringing more pilgrims from far-off places, the single most important factor in building the Sabarimala religious tourism to the present mind-boggling size is this so-called ‘divine.

The revenue earned by Sabarimala temple exclusively during the last Makaravilakku season (December 2010-January 2011), according to India Today (Malayalam edition – February 2, 2011) is a staggering

131.25 crores! The revenue earned during the same period in the earlier years is as follows - 2007-08: 89.53 Crores, 2008-09: 113.20 Crores, 2009-10: 128.72 Crores! Is it then surprising that the perpetrators of the fraud - the priests, the Devaswom Board, the government, the caste and communal outfits, and everyone connected with the temple – would cry foul and try every trick of their trade to shield them from being exposed?

Even a court order will not deter them from telling lies, it now seems. Following the Kerala High Court order to come out with the truth (“Throw light on Makaravilakku: HC” –Deccan Herald, Bangalore, January 21, 2011) whether the ‘divine-light’ is a miracle or man-made, the Sabarimala authorities are concocting more egregious lies to keep the sheep of credulous devotees within their hold. Hence it is all the more necessary for us, the skeptics and humanists, to dissect their lies – the old and the new ones - for the benefit of the larger public.

The Print Media

For the first few days after the tragedy in which 102 pilgrims were killed on the evening of 14 January 2011 at the Pulmedu stretch of Sabarimala Hills, most of the print media (here I focus more on the English newspapers) said nothing about the fraudulent act. This is what they have been doing for decades. Then, following the High Court direction, they realized that it is no more expedient to shield the temple authorities in the name of religious belief.

The first newspaper, to my knowledge, that

explicitly came out with a bold report on the fraudulent act was Deccan Chronicle (Bangalore). In its issue dated 17 January 2011, the paper said it all, and we quote:

Lights out: Nothing ‘divine’ about it

The so-called celestial Makaravilakku light in Sabarimala that evokes awe in devotees is created by officials, who burn load of camphor secretly at the Ponnambalamedu adjacent to the hill shrine and wave wet sacks over it to generate a twinkling effect.

Officials, priests, and even devotees in the know prefer that this ‘hoodwinking’ is not published among lakhs of illiterate devotees from Kerala as well as other states such as Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu.

The hysteric reaction of crowds to Makaravilakku was one of the reasons for the stampede that occurred on Friday killing 102 persons and the one in 1999 that kill 50 persons.

The only slip in the above reportage is that the newspaper decided to go by the recent claim of the Sabarimala authorities that the ‘miracle light’ should be called Makaravilakku and not Makara Jyothi, which, according to them, is a star that rises ‘miraculously’ above the hills during deeparadhana in the temple. The reporter was perhaps not aware that this revised nomenclature was devised to confuse the pilgrims and to continue to rake in the moolah they bring in. It is also a devious attempt to create an impression among the devotees that the temple authorities had not committed any fraud all these years.

The Hindu, which did not give earlier any space to report the successful attempts made by rationalists in exposing the fraud, published a photograph taken at

Ponnambalamedu (22 January 2011). The photograph shows the concrete slab built in the 1990s to conduct the sham pooja as part of creating the ‘miraculous’ camphor light. The most interesting aspect about this photograph is that it was taken by the correspondent (Radhakrishnan Kuttoor) in 2006. The question to be asked is why the newspaper did not publish the photograph earlier. Why did they wait for more than half-a-decade to publish it? Why did they wait for a major accident to occur and for the High Court to give a direction to the authorities to come out with the truth? It all speaks of how serious our newspapers are about the ethics of journalism that demands that the truth be brought to the notice of the public however unpleasant the news is.

Makarajyothi vs. Makaravilakku

As the media was forced to unravel the fraud in aftermath of the tragedy, those connected with the temple started reinventing the origin of the ‘original’ Makarajyothi a la Makaravilakku! In this melee of statements many of them contradicted one another.

Kandararu Maheswararu Thantri, the traditional supreme priest at Sabarimala, now claims that “Makarajyothi is a star in the sky and Makaravilakku was a traditional’deeparadhana’ at Ponnambalamedu. The Jyothi is a celestial phenomenon, but the vilakku is a fire lit for the deeparadhana by people. In the past, tribal families used to light this fire” (The Hindu, Mangalore, 24 January 2011). The priest had made a similar claim in May 2008 too when Kerala’s public opinion turned against godmen and other spiritual fraudsters following the arrest of Santosh Madhavan alias Swami Amritachaitanya.

No less an authority than PRV Raja, President of Pandalam Palace Managing Committee, (the palace is traditionally associated with the Sabarimala Ayyappa temple) contradicted the claim of the priest. In a letter published in The Hindu (Mangalore, 22 January 2011).

According to Raja:

“...the term Makarajyothi is in used only for les than about 40 years in the 1000-year history and legends of the Sabarimala temple....

“The Pandalam Palace does not give importance to Makarajyothi, coined recently to serve vested interests. For his own reasons, the Tantri refers to the star as Makarajyothi. There can even be a hidden agenda to decrease the importance and sanctity of deeparadhana of Lord Ayyapa, with the Holy Ornaments brough from Pandalam. The term Makaravilakku is ancient. But it does not carry its original meaning now. It is unfortunate that even the Tantri has not cared to find out the truth in the controversy. Actually, by Makaravilakku is meant the festival on the day of makarasamkramam including the procession from Malikappuram to Pathinettampadi with caparisoned elephant and other paraphernalia. Note that in many temples in Kerala, the festival days are known as vilakku....While facts stand thus, regularizing, strengthening and publicizing the once-in-many years visible light and elevating the same as Makaravilakku, ignoring the original Makaravilakku can be part of the hidden agenda.” (PRV Raja’s letter is worth quoting in extenso and hence is reproduced at the end of this article)

Role of Travancore Devaswom Board

The lies of the Tantri can at least be excused on the ground that it is only a question of nomenclature. But the lies of M.Rajagopalan Nair, President of Travancore Devaswom Board (TDB), does not deserve any such leniency. This gentleman was lying through his teeth

when he told The Hindu (Mangalore, 22 January 2011), that

“the light sighted at Ponnambalamedu was man-made, but added that the Board (TDB) itself had no role in creating it. According to him, it is believed that in the olden days, forest-dwellers in and around Ponnambalamedu used to celebrate the Makaravilakku festival at the hilltop. The lighting of the lamp at Ponnambalamedu on Makaravilakku day has become an annual affair even after the forest-dwellers vacating the place in later years, he added”

We have the words of former Commissioner of TDB, PV Nalinakshan Nair, to nail the lie of Rajagopalan. According to The Hindu, in a letter to Justice (retired) R.Bhaskaran, Ombudsman for the Travancore and Cochin Devswom Boards, Nalinakshan Nair said that he himself, along with a few Devaswom officials, had visited Ponnambalamedu where the Makarajyothi was being lit every year.

The Hindu (Mangalore, 23 January 2011) quotes Nalinakshan Nair, who also served a term as an Additional Commissioner of Income Tax,

“Makarajyothi has a history of nearly 45 years. The lighting of the Makarajyothi had originally been done by a few families of the Malayara tribe. Officers attached to the Kerala State Electricity Board continued the practice when the forest-dwellers were evicted in connection with the Sabarigiri Hydro-electric Project. The TDB and the Police department took over the duty when the KSEB official too left the place at a later time.

“The Devaswom Executive Engineer at Pampa has been in charge of

lighting the Makarajyothi. The expenses for this have never been debited as Devaswom expenditure.

“When asked why this ‘fraud’ was being perpetrated, the officers said that the ‘Jyothi’ was a signal to disperse the crowd gathered at the Sannidhanam and if the Jyothi does not emerge as expected, the pilgrims would be restive. The officers were trying to make a necessity out of a blatant falsehood.

“When it dawned on me that the TDB will never have the will to abandon the practice, I suggested that the Board should at least make it legitimate by incorporating it as a Devaswom ritual, for which expenditure could be debited in the Devaswom accounts and in course of time declare ‘Makarajyothi’ as a Devaswom ritual. My suggestion fell on deaf years and I left it at that later”

Kummanam Rajashekharan, General Secretary of Hindu Aikya Vedi, a communal outfit, told The Hindu that

“Makarajyothi, and Ponnambalamedu which is considered as the original base of Sabarimala Temple, are realities and part of a strong religious belief. It was the TDB that had constructed a cement platform at Ponnambalamedu, where the ancient Ayyappa shrine of the forest-dwellers stood, a few years ago on the basis of the prescriptions at an astrological consultation (devaprasnam) held at Sabarimala

Kummanam Rajashekharan also claimed that the cement platform was constructed with the knowledge of Kerala High Court to conduct ceremonial offering there on the Makaravilakku day. This statement by

Rajashekharan gives a new twist the whole story. If it is in fact with the knowledge of Kerala High Court that the TDB had constructed the concrete platform on Ponnambalamedu to light Makarajyothi, why did the court ask the TDB to spell out if it was indeed a miracle or lit by man?

Origin of Makarajyothi

Now that the temple authorities are forced to admit that the Makarajyothi is not a miracle, they have no alternative but to reinvent its origin! It is now claimed that tribal devotees of Sabarimala Ayyappan used to conduct an aarati at Ponnambalamedu at the time of deeparadhana.

G. Sukumaran Nair, secretary of Nair Service Society (NSS), a caste-outfit with huge financial and political clout in Kerala, said

“the lighting of the Makarajyothi at Ponnambalamedu is believed to have been part of a religious ceremony of the forest-dwellers in the olden days. The tribal people in the area were forced to resettle on the forest fringes later. Ponnambalamedu is the original base (Moolasthanam) of the Sabarimala Ayyappa Temple and hence performing deeparadhana there should not be made a controversy”.

Kandararu Maheswararu Thantri, the supreme priest at Sabarimala, had also made a similar claim.

While making these statements they forget what the temple authorities themselves had propagated earlier for decades – the myth that Ponnambalamedu was a place where no human being could reach and if any one ever tried to do that tigers, the holy vehicle of Ayyappan, would eat them alive! None of the books ever published in any language by the Sabarimala authorities or the

devotees of the temple ever stated otherwise.

The first ever write up that made this claim – about the tribal angle – was, to my knowledge, a rationalist periodical in Malayalam – Yuktivicharam, published by AV Jose of Yuktivada Pracharanavedi, Trissur, Kerala. At least, no book or other printed material brought out by the temple authorities has ever said so.

In the article published in Yuktivicharam (after visiting Ponnambalamedu on 14 January 1981), AV Jose says and I quote:

*“The information we have is that before the officials of KSEB and Pampa Irrigation Project arrived at Ponnambalamedu, the tribal people belonging to Katar and Malayar tribes used to live there. To protect them from the extreme cold of December-January winter as well as to cook food, they might have lit fire in the evenings. The devotees visiting Sabarimala during Makaravilakku season might have taken it as a ‘divine light’ and started worshipping it as Makarajyothi. They might not have observed whether this light was there before and the day after Makarasankranti. When the Pampa irrigation project was implemented the tribal people left the hills. The Devaswom authorities, who wanted to use it to defraud the pilgrims, however, have made a permanent arrangement to light this ‘divine light’ on the day of Makarasamkranti” (Yuktivicharam, February 1981. These excerpts were later reprinted in the pamphlet **Makarajyothis Enna Thattippu** referred earlier).*

This tribal angle to the Jyothi became, in a strange spiritual twist, a convenient excuse for the fraudsters to use once it became impossible for them to go ahead with the falsehood. As common an activity of the tribal people as lighting fire for the day-to-

day activities like cooking meals or making a bonfire has now been turned into a religious ritual overnight – tribal devotees worshipping their deity Ayyappan! To some Ponnambalamedu even became the Moolasthanam of the original temple!

Threat to Periyar Tiger Reserve

While the role of TDB in lighting the Makarajyothi has thus become crystal clear from the above referred statements, they also give out some ominous hints – an attempt to occupy the forestland at Ponnambalamedu. By falsely claiming that Ponnambalamamedu was the “Moolasthanam” (original base) of Sabarimala Ayyappa temple or that there was Ayyappa shrine of the forest-dwellers, cast and communal outfits under the saffron umbrella are perhaps gearing up to occupy the reserve forest not only during Makaravilakku season but all the year around. The forest in and around Sabarimala has already been adversely affected by the influx of Ayyappa devotees and the ensuing ‘development’. Instead of reversing this, these worthies are eying yet another hill.

The Hindu (15 Febuary 2011, Bangalore) reports that as per notification (GOP No. 75/2007) issued by the Kerala Forests and Wildlife Department on December 31, 2007, “148 sq.km of forestland in the Ranni forest division adjoining the PTR-East and PTR-West forest divisions had been identified for inclusion in the Periyar Tiger Reserve (PTR)”. Quoting L.Krishnaprasad, Ranni Divisional Forest Officer, The Hindu reports that “the earmarked areas include the ecologically sensitive areas of Ponnambalamedu, Chenthamarakokka, Meenar and Varayadumotta”, which are identified as core or critical tiger habitats.

Tigers are endangered species and their survival depends on the conservation of their habitats which are fast shrinking as a result of uncontrolled human activities. The only way to ensure their survival is

complete seclusion of their habitat from any human activities.

Another species under threat is the Shola forests which are endemic to Western Ghats. The forest area, comprising Ponnambalamedu and surrounding areas, has, to quote The Hindu again,

“a vast expanse of biodiversity-rich shola forests, where there is abundance of moisture. Experts say ‘sholas’ are “Tropical Montane Forests’ interspersed with rolling grasslands in mountain tracts 1500 meters above mean sea level and are the continuation of the west coast tropical wet evergreen forests. Shola forests have high ecological significance in protecting the head waters of rivers. They have the capability of holding up water received by precipitation like a sponge, preventing rapid runoff.” (15 February 2011, Bangalore)

(Interested readers may refer the **Wikipedia** entry for more information on Shola forest. A google search also brings up a wealth of information on this plant and its ecological importance to Western Ghats).

Freeing of Ponnambalamedu from the clutches of Ayyappa devotees hence has wider implications than removal of superstitious beliefs of the masses, though very important the later is. Everyone –

religious or otherwise - should raise their voice against the insane overtures of the Devaswom Board who are trying to permanently occupy Ponnambalamedu (there were no structures on the hilltop until the cement slab was built by the TDB in the early 1990s) on the pretext of religious belief. The forest should be left alone – if possible, even the yearly lighting of the Makarajyothi at Ponnambalamedu should also be stopped.

To conclude, let me paraphrase the words of John Grisham quoted at the beginning of this article:

Wonderful, brilliant. Suddenly a new theory, one that has never been mentioned before. One with absolutely no relation to the truth. Let the lying begin! We have a number of websites, blogs and ezines, and we are going to keep a tally of the lies. Lies from the Devaswom Board, the temple authorities, the ministers and politicians ... You have lied for decades and defrauded and killed innocent people, and now that we know the truth, now that your lies will be exposed, you insist on doing precisely what you have always done. Lie! You make me want to puke.

BS

Love, not hope, is what helps us live. Truth, not faith, is what sets us free.

Andre Compte-Sponville
The Book of Atheist Spirituality (2007)

From the President of FIRA

Narendra Nayak

Rationalist Club of Periyar Maniammai University

In a country where most of the students are busy with communal and caste based Politics one would be definitely surprised to note that such a club exists and is alive and kicking! Last year I had been invited to the Periyar Maniammai University to deliver a lecture on the Martyr's day and was appalled to hear the students praising 'martyrs' like Jawharlal Nehru and Sardar Vallabhai Patel! I had to explain to them the meaning of the word and also speak about the Martyr who is my ideal - Bhagath Singh. In the same afternoon we had a program on scientific temper for the Rationalist Club. Right from that time the members of this club were keen to organise a program on scientific temper for their members and the same was arranged by the Vice Chancellor of the University Prof. Ramachandran last week. When I had visited their campus for the World Atheist conference we had been in touch about organising training programs for the younger generation. He had instructed the department of Periyar studies of the university to conduct that. So, in collaboration with them we decided to conduct a three day workshop for their



students and the first one of the series was conducted for the 1st years as others had holidays for preparing for examinations.

On 25th we started it with an inaugural speech by the Vice Chancellor who exhorted the students to live up to the ideals of Periyar and work for the society to improve the level of thinking of the common people. He was very happy that many young people had volunteered for the training. The inaugural session was followed by training sessions in various topics like the prevalent superstitions, unscientific systems of medicine etc. The participants were initially very reluctant to open up but as the days went on they gradually started interacting. The plan of action was to get them to interact about their mindset and then bring about a change in them and thereby motivate them into going into the field to correct the attitudes of the public. A few of them were actually already in the field working among the people. One of them had been already trained by me a few years back and thereafter had been going to the people

with the movie about Periyar. He had been visiting villages nearby with the DVD and a projector in the nights and having Q & A sessions with the audience after showing them the movie. Quite a few of the trainees were already members of the Rationalist club and by the end of the training session a dozen more enlisted.

As a part of this program we had plans to visit places each evening with the trainees and have interactions with public. On the evening of the first day no program could be arranged as the notice was too short. But, the next day evening we went to a suburb of the nearby town Tanjavur where we had interactions with the locals at street corner meeting. The response was quite encouraging. On the last day we had another such interaction and there too the response was quite good. On the third day of the training the valedictory function of our training program was linked to another function. That was the prize distribution for a science competition held for the students of local schools by the Department of Periyar Studies of the university. The



meeting was attended by the students and their parents. I was asked to speak to them and I preferred an interaction on so called miracles and their demonstration and explanations. There was very good response from them and at the end of the session some occasion was given for feed back. I was totally surprised by a 12 year old girl called Cynthia who came on the stage and told that she had believed in these miracles all along and this demonstration had opened her eyes and she would not believe them any longer. It was very fulfilling to hear that from a child who spoke straight from the heart. There was one more surprise from an older member of the audience who had been the subject for a demonstration on my 'science' of astro-numero-palmistry. During the program I had asked for a volunteer for that- since, most of the non trainees around were the university staff that had no belief in such things, one of the parents had come on the stage. As usual I had used the cold reading technique to 'predict' his past which he was made to admit was right! When he came on the stage after the program he told me that

he was happy that he could see the truth at least at the age of 46 years!

The same evening we went to an extension of a nearby town, Tanjavur where we interacted with the public at a street corner meeting. The next day was 28th Feb. the National Science Day. We decided to celebrate it by taking the trainees to a nearby village school at a place called Manjipatti. This was higher primary school and so, we decided to restrict the program to the 10 plus age group. The response was superb- 'subber'- in their words! The children were enthusiastic volunteers and our main problem was to restrict them from over crowding the dais, which was a small area where the teacher stands to teach in front of the black board. But, once these children grow up they become reluctant to come when called- this is applicable to both boys and girls and more to girls! At the end of the program when we asked them for the take home message they were very clear- question everything before you believe it- there are no ghosts, demons, spirits or black magic! It was very heartening to hear that



from the higher primary school students of a village school! The same afternoon we returned to Vallam and from there we came to Tiruchirappali where we had an interaction with the children of the high schools around the Periyar campus where the world atheist conference had been held a few weeks before. We had an excellent session and as usual in such schools the difficulty was to restrict the number of volunteers on the stage- when we wanted one ten used to come! the girls and boys were equally enthusiastic- the girls a little more probably because they were more in number! This was followed by a session in which we had quite a good number of doubts about rebirth, spirits, black magic and such. Even after the others dispersed some children of the English medium section stayed on with their questions and doubts. It was a very satisfying interaction with these students. The University Vice Chancellor Dr.Ramachandran was so pleased with the response of the students that he asked for repeats of the workshop for the other batches. At the time when this first work shop was scheduled, the first year students were the only ones who were free. He wanted us to conduct the same for the other students too. The department of Periyar studies was ready to conduct them and asked me for dates for two more batches and they have been fixed for 21-26 March at the same campus.

It was not only a great pleasure to conduct this program but also to stay on the campus in which there is a lot of emphasis on environmentally friendly technology and recycling of waste. The barren land has been made green by the university who has planted various trees and other flora. The waste water is also recycled by charging a forty feet deep sump from where it percolates to the water table. The garbage is also recycled. Another pleasing thing was that the campus was free of all idols of gods and goddesses and there was no religious ceremony of any sort for any function. I had the occasion to attend their sports day inauguration which was without any invocation or prayer. Though the students were not all rationalists, they were not forced into any sort of ideology. They told me openly that many of them were believers in the supernatural. However, some of them changed their thinking after our interactions and several became member of the Rationalist Club which was quit encouraging! The next programs will be for the seniors who have been already on the campus for some years and we expect a better response from them.

BS

The countless deaths caused by cancer, by the plague, malaria, cholera, Alzheimer's disease, autism, schizophrenia, ...The death caused by earthquakes, tidal waves, hurricanes, droughts, floods and volcanic eruptions. It could only be laughable or obscene to explain away the misery of the just and the suffering of children by original sin. 'We must be born guilty', wrote Pascal 'or God would be unjust.' There is a third, far simpler possibility: namely God does not exist.

Andre Compte-Sponville
The Book of Atheist Spirituality (2007)

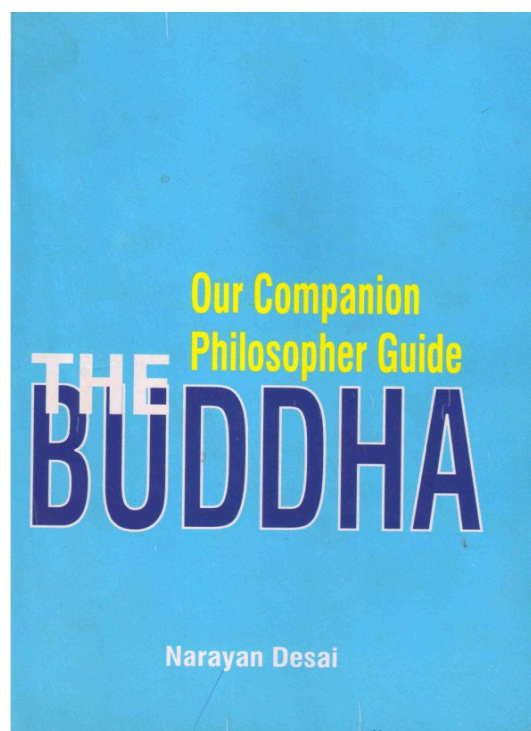


Reflecting on Buddha's Thoughts

Prabhakar Nanawaty

Narayan Desai (1920 - 2008) was a prominent thinker, who boldly propounded atheism, communism and rational morality. The book, *'Our companion Philosopher Guide: The Buddha'* was originally written for Marathi speaking public and has been translated by Ms Suman Oak in English. To Narayan Desai, Buddha Dhamma is a basic thought of civilized human society imbibing new humanism and containing a secular creed. According to author the essence of the Buddha's Dhamma has three main aspects of life which are interrelated to each other. Value education is the first component of Buddha Dhamma. It is essentially self controlling and ethical aspects of life and is most helpful in our day-to-day affairs. The second component, social reform leads one from the 'casteist' bigoted stance into fully enlightened world of knowledge. The third component of Dhamma is making a strenuous elephantine effort to step out of the quagmire of the static state of affairs.

The first part of the book is a fine collection the Buddha's realization, his teachings, his options of middle path and struggle against clergies, i.e. Brahmins of that period. The author comes down very heavily on those who misinterpret Buddha's tenets. In fact most of these commentators are ignorant of social



conditions under which the Buddha had to act. The Buddha period was as turbulent as is ours today. The Brahmin-centered post-Buddha religious scriptures, though praise the then existing social milieu, but it is undoubtedly beset with tussle and strife. There was mutual hatred and suspicion among people. On the one side the exploiting elite class comprising of kings of the warrior caste, the emperor and the group of Brahmins and on the other side were the shoodras, who were supposed to have been born for servitude, to wait upon the elite classes and multitude of toiling

masses, laborers, artisans and other common people. The masses were suffocated in the Brahminical Chaturvarnya system. Masses were prohibited from education and with intellectual penury. Their condition deteriorated to the extreme. It might be one of the darkest ages in the history of India.

The masses showed moral indifference and committed heart-rendering crimes. In fact elite set examples of immoral life and offered the people immoral ideals to follow. The Buddha taught humanity a path that was altogether different from this hellishly violent way and led the whole humanity towards bliss and tranquility.

in their mouths and eating anything that they can lay their hands on. The spiritual – intellectual bombast of the Vedic Brahmins was a shrewd strategy to subdue the urge of the masses for freedom and socio – economic equality. Because of the ignorance the society that suppressed the urge for freedom and progress was hungry of spirituality. It glorified the psycho – social phenomenon depicting it as Mukti, Vimukti, Moksha, longing for Sanyas and Amaratva etc. The Buddha was the first to invoke humanity, the whole society not merely individuals, not to harbor any notions that fail to stand the test of experience and to keep ourselves away from superstitions. He was the first to

Contrary to other religious gurus, the Buddha tells us to
enrich 'your intellect. Analyze everything bit by bit.
Examine critically and know the truth'. In fact the Buddha
is the next step ahead in the 'Thought and Action' of
humanity.

The author feels that in those circumstances (and even today), it was necessary to get out of the jungle of traditional evil dispositions caused by the rituals and secondly to free ourselves from Brahminical rituals. It means banishing the priestly class and their scriptural mumbo jumbo from the social system. The society was plagued with superstitions and irrational rituals of charms and rites performed by Tantriks and Mantriks. The society was caught in collective hypnotism. The stupid fancies like pseudo spirituality, search for immortality, ultimate liberation – Brahmanirvan – were relentlessly chasing the people. It was a sort of infantile behavior; children putting stones and mud

conceive 'Bahujan Sukh'.

The author points out that the biographies of the Buddha that are available today are mostly webs of fantastic astrological forecasts, romantic incidents and fabulous stories about his birth and renunciation etc. Replete with superstitions, they hide the socio – psychological and political reasons that obliged the Buddha to take a vow of austerity and quest for the truth and knowledge. The Buddha's quest for truth created a political dilemma in his own kingdom and compelled him to go into exile. In fact, Dr Ambedkar had explained in detail about the Buddha's search for knowledge, his Dhyana, his Dhyana Marg,

his Yoga, Samadhi, Vipassana and his other conceptions and persuasions. The Buddha taught us that everything that happens in this world according to the law of causation and we must learn to discern what is plausible and logical in these webs of fantasies. Right from the beginning he aimed at building a social structure that will ensure the good and happiness of all common people.

The author in fact compares the Buddha's longing to that of Aristotle and other Greek philosophers of that era. While the Buddha opposed slavery as a form of exploitation, Aristotle treats it as a natural part of human existence. For the Buddha democracy was the best form, for Aristotle democracy is a corrupt form of policy. Even Socrates never stood by slaves. Plato believed that it is birth that guides. The Buddha, even in his last days, urged that never be a naïve supplicant; act according to your own conscience, walk the path that your own light (conscience) illuminates. The Buddha dared to discard the god and dubbed metaphysics as illusory and in-fractional. It was as though he was following the path of Charvaks. But it was the Buddha, who coupled the socio-economic transformation with the ethical –cultural change and brought about the first practical 'Dhammachakra Parivrtan' in people's every day life.

What the author likes about the Buddha was that he later believed in human rationality instead of Hindu superstitions. In the Buddha's thinking there was no place for any intellectual ambiguity or any theory detrimental to the masses. His Dhamma was devoid of all theology, all metaphysics and all dogmatism. At the same time the Buddhist thinking is free from mechanical materialism, modern ultra individualism and grass consumerism witnessed today.

The author emphasizes that one thing we have got to keep in mind here is that the Buddha was not a 'Mahant' - not the chief of any order. His 'Sangh' was not a monastery; not a 'Matha' - Mathas are

exclusively meant for Brahmins while 'Sangh' was open to all. The Buddha's concept of religion was altogether different than what we know. The important thing is that the Buddha considered the objective existence of human suffering as a prime significance. All religions of the world being founded on the imaginary concept of god, their main subject are the knowledge and rituals in connection with the concept of god as given in the 'Book' and interpreted by priests. Eradication of ignorance, disease, old age, death and the other curses arising out of unenlightened natural and human relationships such as gluttony, lust, anger, cruelty, hatred, jealousy, injustice, and lethargy were of utmost importance to the Buddha. While superstitious people maintain that 'truth' is the foundation of their religion, the Buddha tells us examining every truth is the foundation of enlightenment. They coax us to have firm faith and truth springs forth in you. On the contrary, the Buddha tells us 'enrich your intellect. Analyze everything bit by bit. Examine critically and know the truth'. In fact the Buddha is the next step ahead in the 'Thought and Action' of humanity.

The author laments that Western as well as many Indian critics had ignored this revolutionary aspect of social reformation in the Buddha's thought. It is very clear that the Buddhist thought is activity of man oriented towards "Bahujan Hitay Bahujan Sukhay". Brahminic thought, on the contrary, concentrates on the Casteist duties and grace of god! All their so called gods were amorous and the mystical stories of gods were used to defend their witty tricks and exploitations. This religion should have condemned such thoughts. That would have been the real religion or otherwise it is irreligion! In fact Buddhism was a revolt against the tradition of Vedas, the Brahmins and the Upanishads!

The Buddha's philosophy has potential to guide us even today. It teaches us how a human being should lead his personal life; what is a healthy mind; whom to consider

an ideal person; what the source of morality is; how does it develop and also change. In fact faith in supernatural phenomena, chants, sorcery black magic and misuse of hypnotism are all against the theory of Buddha Dhamma. The author is aware of the fact that to understand the gist of Buddha Dhamma, a mere verbal interpretation is not adequate; what is essential is all comprehensive understanding and interpretation in total context.

According to the author, from 7th century onwards Buddhism started decaying and step by step surrendering to reaction. Buddhism split into two sects viz, Mahayana and Hinayana. Mahayan philosophy adopted metaphysics, superstitions and hero worship whereas Hinayan philosophy concentrated mostly on individual liberation and its orientation towards the masses reduced to almost nil after a few centuries. Buddhism deteriorated and degraded yielding the space for different forms of Tantrik yogic worships.

While making the statements, the author had used a number of references and studied them in detail and in fact he quotes them in verbatim. As stated in the Forward

to the book by Arjun Dangle "Narayan Desai has tried his best by reminding and reassuring all of us to have one more look at the Buddha's fundamentally un-fundamentalistic revolutionary thoughts and teachings. He could do it as he possesses all those natural abilities normally found in a social scientist i.e. quest for knowledge, dedication and commitment to social – moral revolution."

***Our Companion, Philosopher,
Guide: The Buddha***

Narayan Desai
(Translated by Ms Suman Oak)
Lokvangmay Griha, Mumbai (2007)
Rs 70 ; pp 71

BS

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Andhashradha Nirmoolan Samiti.
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The Buddha is in effect only a sage, drawing his knowledge by his own effort from within himself; he does not claim to be an inspired prophet. Moreover, the Buddha doubts that such a category of inspired beings can be taken seriously. He therefore concludes that humanity must elaborate its own morality without recourse to revelation, deriving its wisdom from the wisdom of human beings.

Samir Amin
***Eurocentrism* (2008)**

Skeptic News

Bangalore Vicharavadi Sangha (Bangalore Rationalist Association)

Bangalore Vicharavadi Sangha conducts monthly lectures and discussions on various topics. Those who are interested in attending the programmes conducted by the association may contact:

Dr. M.N.Keshava Rao (Phone: 26690269. Email: keshava_rao@hotmail.com)

A.S.Nataraj (Phone: 26696553. Email: rajsri@bgl.vsnl.net.in)

District Level meetings of Karnataka State Federation of Rationalist Associations are being convened across the state. Those who would like to be part of the organization are requested to contact the State

Convener of KSFRA

BVV Subba Rao. Phone: 09886679088.

Email: babukadur44@gmail.com

Tools for Skeptical Thinking

Carl Sagan

Carl Sagan's famous essay, *The Fine Art of Baloney Detection*, more or less encapsulates the basic tenets of Skeptical Thinking. The present article is an extract from the essay.

The full text can be found in one of Sagan's best-sellers *The Demonhaunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark*.

- Wherever possible there must be independent confirmation of the "facts."

- Encourage substantive debate on the evidence by knowledgeable proponents of all points of view.

- Arguments from authority carry little weight—"authorities" have made mistakes in the past. They will do so again in the future. Perhaps a better way to say it is that in science there are no authorities; at most, there are experts.

- Spin more than one hypothesis. If there's something to be explained, think of all the different ways in which it could be explained. Then think of tests by which you might systematically disprove each of the alternatives. What survives, the hypothesis that resists disproof in this Darwinian selection among "multiple working hypotheses," has a much better chance of being the right answer than if you had simply run with the first idea that caught your fancy.

- Try not to get overly attached to a hypothesis just because it's yours. It's only a way station in the pursuit of knowledge. Ask yourself why you like the idea. Compare it fairly with the alternatives. See if you can find reasons for rejecting it. If you don't, others will.

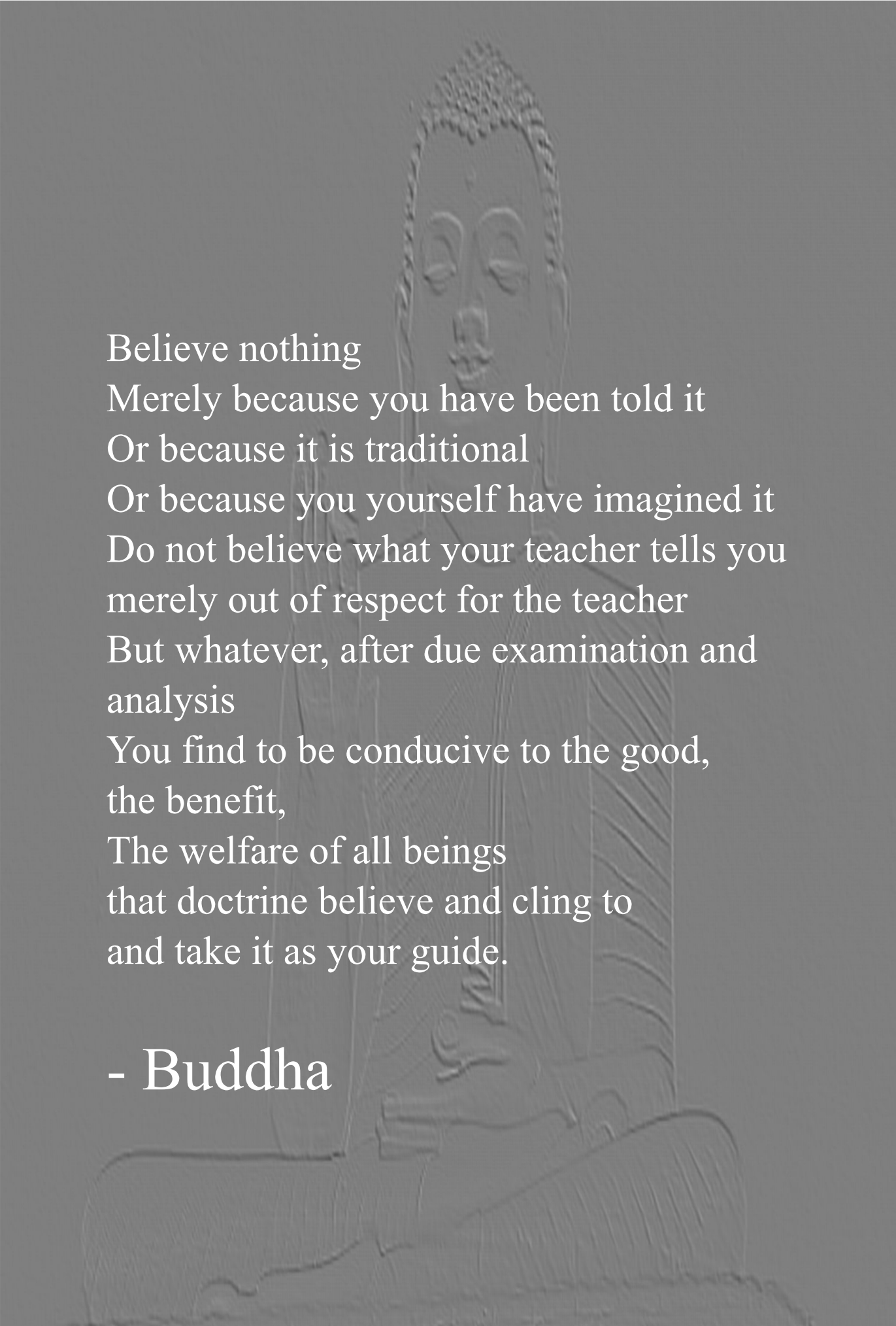


- Quantify. If whatever it is you're explaining has some measure, some numerical quantity attached to it, you'll be much better able to discriminate among competing hypotheses. What is vague and qualitative is open to many explanations. Of course there are truths to be sought in the many qualitative issues we are obliged to confront, but finding them is more challenging.

- If there's a chain of argument, every link in the chain must work (including the premise) —not just most of them.

- Occam's Razor. This convenient rule-of-thumb urges us when faced with two hypotheses that explain the data equally well to choose the simpler.

- Always ask whether the hypothesis can be, at least in principle, falsified. Propositions that are untestable, unfalsifiable are not worth much. You must be able to check assertions out. Inveterate skeptics must be given the chance to follow your reasoning, to duplicate your experiments and see if they get the same result.



Believe nothing
Merely because you have been told it
Or because it is traditional
Or because you yourself have imagined it
Do not believe what your teacher tells you
merely out of respect for the teacher
But whatever, after due examination and
analysis
You find to be conducive to the good,
the benefit,
The welfare of all beings
that doctrine believe and cling to
and take it as your guide.

- Buddha